

# Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen G. White Studies in the 1970s

by Donald R. McAdams

In 1970, 55 years after the death of Ellen G. White, Adventist scholars began for the first time to examine critically her writings and to share their conclusions with the community of Adventist intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> The scholarship started with a cluster of articles in the autumn 1970 number of *SPECTRUM*. Other articles, a book and several unpublished manuscripts followed. Ten years later, we can see that the 1970s introduced a new era in the study of Ellen White.

The scholarship of this decade differs significantly from what has gone before. One of the reasons for this difference is *SPECTRUM*. Not only has an outlet for their work stimulated Adventist scholars to engage in systematic research, but also the dissemination of the research to the Adventist intellectual community has enabled scholars to build on what has gone before. Just as scientific periodicals were essential for the "Scientific Revolution," *SPECTRUM* has been essential for the development of Ellen White studies.

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A more fundamental reason for the critical work done in the 1970s is that, considering the historical development of Adventism, it was inevitable. A religious or revolutionary movement that becomes a historical force must have a first generation of leaders we might call founding fathers. The founding fathers endure opposition, privation, suffering, and, in the face of great odds, create a revolution, establish a new nation or create a religious movement. They are characterized by tremendous energy, unswerving commitment to a goal and the charisma to translate theory into practice.

It is the task of the second-generation leaders to hold the movement together without the charisma and prestige of the founding fathers. Faced with the possibility of disintegration, the second-generation leaders elevate the symbol of the movement onto a lofty pedestal and claim great virtue, wisdom and authority for the now-dead founder. Nothing gives the second-generation leaders more authority than to claim all wisdom for the founder and claim for themselves the exclusive right to interpret his legacy.

But, inevitably, a third generation arises — a generation that has been reared in what is no longer a young and struggling movement,

but a well-established and apparently indestructible party, nation or church. Secure in the stability and strength of the organization, the third generation will commence the critical examination of the movement's origin. If this paradigm is even a little accurate, by 1970 the time had come for Adventists to conduct a critical examination of Ellen White's spiritual gift.

There were, of course, questions about Ellen White before 1970. From the time of her first vision in December 1844 until her death in July 1915, the originality and authority of Ellen White's writings were debated frequently. Occasionally, the debate became bitter and public as the names D. M. Canright, John Harvey Kellogg and A. T. Jones remind us. But the examination of Ellen White's gift that took place before her death came not from believing scholars seeking to understand how God's Spirit had worked in her life. The critics were either active participants in the political life of the church, making points in a struggle for power, or bitter apostates.

Following Ellen White's death, ministers and teachers continued to discuss the nature and proper use of the "Spirit of Prophecy." This ferment has been dramatically revealed by the publication in the May 1979 SPECTRUM of selected transcripts from the Bible and History Teachers Conference held in Takoma Park in 1919. An unpublished paper by Bert Haloviak, assistant director of the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, describes the passionate and sometimes heated controversy that swirled around the Bible Conference and the debate on the meaning of the "Daily" in Daniel 8:11-13. The interpretation and use of the "Spirit of Prophecy" was the real issue in this debate which began as early as 1898 and continued into the 1930s. And charges that they were weak on the "Spirit of Prophecy" contributed to the termination of E. F. Albertsworth, H. C. Lacey and C. M. Sorenson from the Bible department of Washington Foreign Mission Seminary in 1920 and the nonreelection of A. G. Daniells as General Conference president in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the attacks on Ellen White by Canright and others and in an attempt to

settle the disputes of the 1920s and 1930s, Adventists published several significant books on Ellen White: W. H. Branson's *In Defense of the Faith: The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists, A Reply to Canright* (1933),<sup>3</sup> F. M. Wilcox's *The Testimony of Jesus, A Review of the Work and Teachings of Mrs. Ellen Gould White* (1934),<sup>4</sup> and Francis D. Nichol's exhaustive *Ellen G. White and Her Critics: An Answer to the Major Charges that Critics Have Brought Against Mrs. Ellen G. White* (1951).<sup>5</sup> These books, and others, were based on careful research and were the products of first-class minds. They are extremely valuable for what they tell us about Ellen White and how the church leaders viewed her writings and expected Adventists to use them. One could not say, however, that these books were critical examinations of the "Spirit of Prophecy." They were apologetic books written to answer the charges of critics and bolster the faith of believers.

The scholarship of the 1970s had a different origin and purpose. It began with a bang in the autumn 1970 SPECTRUM. Richard B. Lewis, professor of English at Loma Linda University, pointed out that to use the expression "Spirit of Prophecy" to refer to Ellen White or her writings was neither precise use of language nor unquestionably sound exegesis of Revelation 14:12 and Revelation 12:17.<sup>6</sup>

Frederick E. J. Harder, dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Andrews University, in a sophisticated theological analysis of divine revelation, suggested a flexible and experiential view of revelation and emphasized the work of the Spirit of God on the contemporary church both individually and collectively.<sup>7</sup> "The Holy Spirit," said Harder, "acts on the mind by expanding its powers, enlightening its understanding, impressing it with flashes of insight and conviction, guiding it into attitudes, and impressing upon it a character. By such concursive action God reveals Himself to man and man apprehends God."<sup>8</sup> Harder made two very significant statements regarding Ellen White's historical work: "She was not writing history, she was interpreting it";<sup>9</sup> and

“the history was learned by ordinary means, but the activity of God in the historical situation was seen by revelation.”<sup>10</sup> Harder’s article anticipated some of the major conclusions of the decade. The research of the past ten years can be easily fit into the model of inspiration he suggested.

Unfortunately, Harder’s article did not receive the attention it deserved because of the furor created by the articles prepared by Roy Branson and Herold Weiss, both assistant professors in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and by William S. Peterson, an associate professor of English at Andrews University. The Branson and Weiss article asserted that it was an essential and immediate task for the church to establish “more objective ways of understanding what Ellen White said.” Specifically, they called on Adventist scholars to “discover the nature of Mrs. White’s relationship to other authors,” “recover the social and intellectual milieu in which she lived and wrote” and “give close attention to the

pervasive, not less. But they insisted upon objective scholarship and a critical examination of sources. Their questions have been the major questions of the decade.

William S. Peterson’s article, “A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen White’s Account of the French Revolution,”<sup>12</sup> was the first article to examine critically Ellen White’s sources. Peterson asked the following questions:

What historians did Ellen White regard most highly? Do they have in common any particular social or political bias? How careful was she in her use of historical evidence? Did she ever make copying errors in transcribing material from her sources? Is there any particular category of historical information which she consistently ignored? Did she make use of the best scholarship available in her day? What did the revisions and the successive editions of *The Great Controversy* reveal about her changing intentions?

After a brief survey of the development of the chapter on the French Revolution, Peterson examined nine of the historians cited in the chapter. He concluded that all were anti-Catholic and anti-Democratic, strong on “moral fervor and weak on factual evidence.”<sup>13</sup> Second, Peterson examined how Ellen White used these sources. He concluded that she used them carelessly, sometimes simply misreading them, other times exaggerating them, and occasionally leaving out crucial facts, thereby distorting the significance of the event.

W. Paul Bradley, chairman of the board of the Ellen G. White Estate, responded to all the articles in the spring 1971 *SPECTRUM*.<sup>14</sup> While acknowledging to Branson and Weiss that Ellen White was sometimes quoted out of context, he asserted that Adventists did not need to use the tools of scholarship to understand her properly. In response to Harder’s article, Bradley cautioned Adventists not to define revelation so generally that “every sincere believer living in the right relationship to God becomes a prophet.”<sup>15</sup>

Bradley directed his most detailed reply to

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development of Ellen White’s writings within her own lifetime, and also to the development of the church.”<sup>11</sup>

Nothing could more clearly distinguish the Ellen White scholarship of the 1970s from the controversies of her own lifetime and the arguments of the 1920s and 1930s than these three steps suggested by Branson and Weiss. Their motive was not to tear down, but to understand Ellen White. Branson and Weiss wanted a more “consistent interpretation of these inspired writings.” They wanted to “recapture Ellen White’s original intentions or the absolute truth of what she meant.” They wanted her influence to become more

Peterson. His basic objection was the assumption that Ellen White based her writings on the writings of others. Although she consulted historical writers for "supplemental data, her basic source," said Bradley, "was the visions God gave to her."<sup>16</sup> Dealing with Peterson's specific points, Bradley pointed out that, though citations had not been supplied in the 1888 edition, copied passages were placed within quotation marks, and in the 1911 edition, proper sources were given for all quotations. And why should not Ellen White use strongly anti-Catholic authors? They described events in harmony with the prophecies of the Bible and the visions God had given to her.

Bradley did not reject the possibility that Ellen White incorporated some of the errors of the historians into her own text. Her preoccupation, he said, was with the meaning of events and not with the "names of all the places, the exact identity of the people, the hour of the day, and other minor details over which historians differ."<sup>17</sup> Because she focused attention on the "controversy issue," and not on "the minutia of the historical account," Bradley believed that "an inaccuracy brought over from a historian into her writings would not cause too great concern."<sup>18</sup> Bradley's article was restrained and judicious. He took no cheap shots at Peterson and displayed in his article the same Christian character that had marked his previous years of service as missionary and church administrator.

Peterson's response to Bradley which appeared in the summer 1971 SPECTUM was humorously entitled "An Imaginary Conversation on Ellen G. White: A One-Act Play for Seventh-day Adventists."<sup>19</sup> In this imaginary, and slightly condescending, conversation between Bradley and himself, Peterson highlighted their disagreement. He contributed no new evidence to the debate, but did pick up Bradley's acknowledgment that Ellen White used historical sources and could occasionally make small errors in factual matters. Peterson pressed this point to highlight the implication in the area of science and religion. If statements of chronology are not always reliable, he said, then perhaps Ellen White's chronological statements about the

age of the earth are also open to reevaluation.

The most detailed and abrasive response to Peterson was an article in the autumn 1971 SPECTRUM by John W. Wood, Jr., a master of divinity student at Andrews University.<sup>20</sup> His conclusion can be best summarized in his own words: "I have shown that the sources used [by Ellen White] were not poor ones, nor were they mishandled. Instead, they were used soundly and consistently to present those things which Mrs. White had seen in vision."<sup>21</sup> Wood was industrious; and he did catch Peterson in several errors, though in no case significant errors. But all his industry failed to rescue the reputation of the historians in question or alter Peterson's conclusion that the chapter on the French Revolution in the 1888 *The Great Controversy* contained historical errors. Unfortunately,

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the article was also marred by frequent sarcastic comments disparaging Peterson's scholarship.

Peterson's specific and bitter reply, "Ellen White's Literary Indebtedness," immediately followed Wood's article.<sup>22</sup> After accusing Wood of "(a) manipulating evidence to his own advantage, (b) offering misleading generalizations about the historiography of the French Revolution, (c) repeatedly asserting what he cannot prove, and (d) concealing the dogmatic assumptions upon which his argument rests," Peterson proceeded to refute systematically the fine points of Wood's article. The historians were poor ones; the historical errors were real.

The ironic aftermath to the entire Peterson affair was an article by Ronald Graybill, a research assistant at the White Estate, in the

summer 1972 SPECTRUM, entitled "How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources? The French Revolution Chapter of *The Great Controversy*." <sup>23</sup> Graybill undermined crucial aspects of Peterson's hypothesis and made irrelevant many of the criticisms put forth by John Wood and others. A study of the notes left by Clarence C. Crisler, Ellen White's secretary when the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* was being prepared, disclosed that the literary source for the chapter on the French Revolution was not a collection of historians, whether good ones or poor ones, but primarily one writer, Uriah Smith. His *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation* was the basic source for the chapter. One discovers, wrote Graybill, that Ellen White . . . used nothing from Scott, Gleig, Thiers, or Alison that Smith did not have. Every time Smith deleted material, she deleted the same material. Although occasionally she deleted more. She even used the quotations in exactly the same order on pages 275 and 276. There can be no doubt that she drew the historical quotations from Smith, not from the original works.

So it was not Ellen White who selected poor historians and misread or distorted the evidence found in them. It was Uriah Smith!

Peterson had noted in his response to Wood that this chapter

. . . was an untypical chapter in its use of a wide variety of historical sources. Some of the earlier chapters of *The Great Controversy* are based almost exclusively on D'Aubigné—that is, virtually every paragraph is a quotation, close paraphrase, or summary of D'Aubigné.

Peterson added, "D'Aubigné, in these chapters, is supplying the *structure* and *perspective* of the book, not merely a few illustrative details." <sup>24</sup> Graybill's articles made it clear that the chapter on the French Revolution was not untypical after all. Ellen White was continuing with this chapter the pattern of the book.

Graybill's article may have satisfied many who thought Peterson had been finally put in his place. But, in fact, Graybill's article opened the can of worms even farther. At least in Peterson's view, Ellen White had been doing historical research, albeit poor

historical research. Graybill's article made it clear that she was not doing historical research at all, merely following one major source. Graybill's discovery also illustrated what would become increasingly evident during the decade: that the White Estate vault held many undisclosed and unexamined sources crucial to a proper understanding of Ellen White.

The most significant work on Ellen White in the 1970s was *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* by Ronald L. Numbers. <sup>25</sup> By the time of publication in May of 1976, Numbers had been appointed an assistant professor of the history of medicine and history of science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, but most of the research and writing had been completed while Numbers served on the faculty of the School of Medicine at Loma Linda University. Numbers' small volume, thoroughly researched and clearly written, was a first-class piece of historical scholarship and recognized as such in professional journals. <sup>26</sup>

Numbers opened his book with a clear statement on his methodology:

. . . this is, I believe, the first book written about her [Ellen White] that seeks neither to defend nor to damn but simply to understand. As one raised and educated within Adventism, I admittedly have more than an academic interest in Mrs. White's historical fate; but I have tried to be as objective as possible. Thus I have refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation.

In so doing, I have parted company with those Adventist scholars who insist on the following presuppositions: (1) that the Holy Spirit has guided the Advent movement since the early 1840's; (2) "that Ellen Harmon White was chosen by God as His messenger and her work embodied that of a prophet," (3) "that as a sincere, dedicated Christian and a prophet, Ellen White would not and did not falsify," and (4) that the testimony of Mrs. White's fellow believers "may be accepted as true and correct to the best of the memory of the individuals who reported."\* It seems to me

that such statements, particularly the last two, are more properly conclusions than presuppositions.<sup>27</sup>

Numbers' basic thesis was that Ellen White derived her health reform ideas from contemporary health reformers such as James C. Jackson, William Alcott, Sylvester Graham, Dio Lewis, L. B. Coles and others while asserting that she did not borrow from others but obtained her views from God. In addition, Numbers showed Ellen White's claiming divine revelation for changing views and unscientific statements about health reform.

The inevitable controversy broke even before the book was published. Much discussion swept through Adventist intellectual circles as a result of clandestinely obtained and circulated typescripts of the first draft. Also, as a courtesy to the White Estate staff, Numbers had provided them with a typescript

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before sending the final draft to the publisher.

The White Estate, hoping that Numbers would delete or alter offensive passages, provided him, in February of 1975, with an extensive paragraph-by-paragraph critique of his manuscript. As a result of this strategy, the White Estate placed in Numbers' hands probably the most exhaustive critique of a manuscript any author has ever had the privilege of receiving before publication. Numbers could alter his manuscript in response to criticisms he considered valid and present additional evidence to support his positions where he considered the criticisms invalid.

Gary Land has summarized well the official church response to Numbers in this SPECTRUM. A paperback edition of D. E. Robin-

son's *Story of Our Health Message*, along with study guides, was prepared for use in the churches, and a 23-page pamphlet refuting Numbers put into immediate circulation. In the autumn, the White estate sent a 127-page, double-columned pamphlet to all religion and history teachers in Adventist colleges and universities. *A Critique of the Book, "Prophetess of Health"* reviewed chapter by chapter alleged errors in Numbers' book. While admitting some problems and acknowledging some borrowing from other authors, the *Critique* charged Numbers with misreading sources and leaving out important evidence.

Once again, SPECTRUM was at the center of the debate. The January 1977 issue contained a series of reviews of Numbers' book, in addition to Numbers' response. In addition to an abstract of the White Estate *Critique* published under the title "A Biased, Disappointing Book," the issue included reviews by William Frederick Norwood, Richard Schwarz, Fritz Guy and two non-Adventist historians — Fawn M. Brodie and Ernest R. Sandeen.<sup>28</sup> These reviews and Numbers' response, along with Gary Land's review of the White Estate critique in the March 1978 SPECTRUM,<sup>29</sup> should be read by all Adventists who want to evaluate fairly *Prophetess of Health*.

W. F. Norwood, retired professor of cultural medicine at Loma Linda University and one of the few Adventist historians to achieve distinction as a scholar, gave Numbers high marks for accuracy and asserted that the book "need be disturbing only to those who have come to exalt Ellen White to a pedestal of inerrancy or infallibility, a position she did not claim for herself or even for the Bible writers."<sup>30</sup>

Richard Schwarz, professor of history and chairman of the history and political science department at Andrews University and author of *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, dealt gently with his friend and former colleague. He acknowledged that Numbers' facts were essentially correct, though he believed Numbers had relied too much on hostile witnesses. The two disagreed on the in-

terpretation of the facts, rather than the facts themselves.

The review by Fritz Guy, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Loma Linda University, accepted the errors charged to Numbers by the White Estate critique, but at the same time accepted the human fallibility of Ellen White and called on the church to develop a concept of inspiration that could handle these facts. His own brief analysis of inspiration was cogent and succinct.

The review by Fawn M. Brodie, U.C.L.A. professor, psychohistorian and controversial biographer of Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith, was undoubtedly the most shocking article ever to appear in SPECTRUM. The heat on the SPECTRUM editors for publishing it was justifiably intense. She first praised the book as "excellent, meticulously documented social history."<sup>31</sup> Then noting that Numbers had deliberately avoided an analysis of Ellen White's mental health and psychic abilities, she proceeded to use the data in the book to proffer her own. Ellen White's visions, she asserted, were a form of self-hypnosis springing from the psychic conflicts of her repressed sexuality.

In many ways, the most perceptive of the reviews was the one by Ernest R. Sandeen, author of the *Roots of Fundamentalism* and a historian on the faculty at McAlester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sandeen commended Numbers' scholarship and then commented specifically on the intellectual dilemma presented by the book, both to Numbers and to the church: "When the historian and the believer are the same person, the writing of a book can become an enterprise fraught with tension and, occasionally, agony. One must be an obtuse reader, indeed, not to see this tension and even feel this agony in the pages of Numbers' book." At the very heart of the dilemma, said Sandeen, was the conflict between belief and skepticism:

Whatever the personal pain it produces in the historian, it does produce good historical scholarship. It almost seems like a historiographical law that the best scholarship is produced by the skeptical believer. That Numbers cares deeply about the history of Ellen G. White is apparent on almost every page. He feels strongly about the importance of his subject, as every good historian must. But he has not

accepted tradition or someone else's word concerning the career and teaching of this amazing woman. He has discovered things that appear to shock and surprise him, but he has had the courage to state them clearly.<sup>32</sup>

In a very profound conclusion, Sandeen challenged the Adventist church to not fight historical scholarship, but to struggle openly with the problem and establish the truth for today.

The last words were given to Numbers himself. Clearly and forcibly, Numbers took on his critics and point by point laid almost every one of their charges of factual error to rest. Thanks in part to his prepublication discussions with the White Estate, he was well prepared to defend his points and did so convincingly.

What is the conclusion of the whole matter?

Some facts must be considered to have been established by Numbers in *Prophetess of Health*: (1) Ellen White was a part of the nineteenth-century American health reform movement and was influenced by other health reformers. (2) During the course of her life, Ellen White's views on health reform changed. (3) Ellen White held some views about the laws of health that few Adventists today consider scientifically valid.

Implicit in Numbers' book was the methodology suggested by Branson and Weiss six years before. Numbers had examined the nature of Ellen White's relationship to other authors, attempted to recover the social and intellectual milieu in which she lived and wrote, and given close attention to the development of her writings within her own lifetime and also to the development of the church. The Numbers' book, though by far the most controversial of the works published on Ellen White in the 1970s, was part and parcel of the general intellectual movement. He approached his research from the same background and asked the same questions.

But one basic difference separates Numbers from the other scholars who have critically examined Ellen White. They explicitly accept the supernatural inspiration of Ellen

White, and he does not. They assert her inspiration and maintain its compatibility with literary indebtedness and fallibility. Numbers stands uncommitted. But the uncommitted stance of his book looks to many Adventists like unbelief.

At the same time that the White Estate was combating the work of Ronald Numbers, it was considering how to respond to another study on Ellen White, a 244-page typescript entitled "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians: The Evidence from an Unpublished Manuscript on John Huss." This paper, the result of my own research, was sent to the White Estate with a request for criticism in March of 1974.<sup>33</sup>

During the summer of 1973, while reading letters and documents in the White Estate on the history of the Adventist publishing work, I became acquainted with several Ellen White manuscript fragments that appeared to be portions of the first draft of the 1888 *The Great Controversy*. The longest manuscript, consisting of 64 sheets of full-size writing paper with writing filling the front of each sheet and on 11 pages filling some portion of the back, turned out to be the rough draft for the half-chapter on John Huss. The White Estate allowed me to transcribe this manuscript into typescript.

I had completed in February of 1973 a 105-page study that examined Ellen White's use of historians in Chapter XIV, "Later English Reformers," and the first half of Chapter VI, "Huss and Jerome." Discovery of the Huss manuscript seemed providential. I was now able to present in a revised paper in one column James A. Wylie's account of Huss from *The History of Protestantism*, in a second column Ellen White's rough draft, and in a third column her account as published in *The Great Controversy*. I presented this, along with some introductory and explanatory material, to the White Estate in March of 1974.

What did the evidence prove?

... the historical portions of *The Great Controversy* that I have examined are selective abridgements and adaptation of historians. Ellen White was not just borrowing paragraphs here and there that she ran across in her reading, but in fact following the historians page after page, leaving out

much material, but using their sequence, some of their ideas, and often their words. In the examples I have examined I have found no historical fact in her text that is not in their text. The hand-written manuscript on John Huss follows the historian so closely that it does not even seem to have gone through an intermediary stage, but rather from the historian's printed page to Mrs. White's manuscript, including historical errors and moral exhortations.<sup>34</sup>

Study of the Huss manuscript also revealed that Mrs. White's literary assistant at the time, Miss Marian Davis, not only improved Mrs. White's English usage but also played a very significant role in deleting a large amount of original material dealing with the spiritual significance of events and adding additional material from Wylie.

I believed when I wrote "Ellen G. White

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and the Protestant Historians," and still do, that the evidence is compatible with Ellen White's statements claiming inspiration regarding historical events and describing her use of Protestant historians. A belief that God revealed to Ellen White the activities of Christ and His angels and Satan and his angels in the great-controversy struggle, along with occasional flashlight views of historical events with explanations about the spiritual significance of those events, is compatible with the evidence. A belief that God showed Ellen White one historical scene after another making up the continuous historical narrative that appears in *The Great Controversy* is not.

The Numbers' controversy and the illness



of Arthur White, secretary of the White Estate, delayed the response to my paper. Also, the White Estate desired to examine independently a fourth chapter in *The Great Controversy*. Ron Graybill completed this in May 1977. His "Ellen G. White's Account of Martin Luther's Experience from Worms to Wartburg" was an analysis of the first six pages of a 51-page Ellen White manuscript. In this manuscript, Ellen White is once again copying and closely paraphrasing a historian; but in this case the historian is not d'Aubigné, the primary source, but a popularized version of d'Aubigné prepared by the Reverend Charles Adams for youthful readers. And the material on Luther is not taken over directly into *The Great Controversy*, but first appears in a *Signs of the Times* article, October 11, 1883, entitled "Luther in the Wartburg."

To present his material, Graybill needed seven columns. D'Aubigné's account is in column one; Adams' condensation of the story appears in column two. Column three is a typescript of Ellen White's manuscript, column four, the article from the *Signs of the Times*, column five, the same account condensed for the *Spirit of Prophecy*, and column six and seven, the passages from the 1888 and 1911 *The Great Controversy*.

The scholarship is flawless and gives a fascinating insight into how Ellen White used sources and modified them for different publication objectives. Graybill concluded that "there does not appear to be any objective historical fact in Mrs. White's account that she could not have gained from the literary sources on which she was drawing except in one detail." "The overall impression gained from this study by this researcher is that it sustains McAdams' main point — that the objective and mundane historical narrative was based on the work of historians, not on visions."<sup>35</sup>

At last, the White Estate was ready to respond to my paper. At the time of the Annual Council in October of 1977, I met with the staff members and went over the paper page by page. In most cases, I accepted their suggestions and made appropriate revisions. I presented the revised paper to the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians at their annual meeting held in Dallas in December of 1977.

The paper was not written for a wide audience, and cannot be published because the White Estate has chosen not to release the Huss manuscript. I believe it would be unwise for me to present my conclusions without displaying the evidence upon which they are based. However, the paper was available, under careful restrictions, for a few months at Adventist college libraries in North America during the spring of 1978 and can now be read at any of the Ellen G. White research centers.

During the fall and winter of 1977-1978, the White Estate was finally putting together its official response. The document went through several drafts and received criticism from seminary professors and General Conference officers. "Toward a Factual Concept of Inspiration, II: The Role of the Visions in the Use of Historical Sources in *The Great Controversy*" was issued over the name of Arthur L. White in April of 1978. Copies were sent to college and university history and religion teachers.

The 58-page typescript, with notes and appendices, is very carefully developed and thorough. The paper deals specifically with distinctions between thought inspiration and verbal inspiration, the use of other authors in inspired texts and the possibility of discrepancies in inspired writings. After a brief examination of these points as they relate to the Bible, Elder White looks specifically at *The Great Controversy*. Numerous Ellen White quotes and W. C. White quotes are presented, and then Graybill's work on the Luther manuscript and my work on the Huss manuscript are reviewed.

The document holds the traditional view that the reformation historians "helped her [Ellen White] to locate and describe many of the events and movements presented to her in vision."<sup>36</sup> But at the same time, the paper acknowledges that Ellen White does "not claim the visions alone as the basis for every historical detail that she presents in *The Great Controversy*."<sup>37</sup> The possibility of historical error is also tepidly acknowledged: "It is always possible that the discovery in the future of documents believed to be more correct

would modify our knowledge of some historical details.”<sup>38</sup> The paper, in short, acknowledges the new data and puts it into a broad interpretation of inspiration.

Surprisingly, “Toward a Factual Concept of Inspiration, II” is less candid in acknowledging that Ellen White did not see every historical event in vision and made historical errors than W. Paul Bradley’s response to William S. Peterson seven years earlier. Also, the document hangs onto at least one W. C. White quote that does not fit the evidence: “Of this you may be sure, because I know whereof I speak. Her use of the language of the historians was not for the sake of bringing into the book something that had not been revealed to her, but was an effort to utilize in the best language she could find, the description of scenes presented to her. . . .”<sup>39</sup>

About the time the White Estate was responding to the evidence that Ellen White had borrowed extensively from Protestant historians in the preparation of *The Great Controversy*, another researcher was bringing to their attention evidence that she had also borrowed from secular authors for other books in the Conflict of the Ages series, especially *Prophets and Kings* and *The Desire of Ages*. Walter Rea, pastor of the Long Beach, California, Church, asserted, on the basis of inconclusive evidence presented in several unpublished papers, that the major source for *Prophets and Kings* was *Bible History, Old Testament* by Alfred Edersheim, originally published in seven volumes between 1876 and 1877,<sup>40</sup> and that Edersheim’s *The Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah*, first published in 1883, was a major source for *The Desire of Ages*.<sup>41</sup>

The *Review and Herald* responded to the Numbers’ book with an editorial in the August 1976 number entitled “An Important Challenge to the Faith?”<sup>42</sup> Now the growing awareness in Adventist circles of Walter Rea’s research and the studies of *The Great Controversy* called for another response in the *Review*. “Toward an Adventist Concept of Inspiration” by Arthur White appeared in four parts in the *Adventist Review* beginning with the January 12, 1978 number.<sup>43</sup> In this series, Arthur White acknowledged the facts without ever drawing specific attention to them:

Was Ellen White shown in each instance in minute detail all of the names of the places and the dates of the events which she beheld? The evidence is that she was not. She saw events occur — events significant as a part of the controversy story. Minor details and incidental references not basic to the account were of less importance. Some of this information could be ascertained from the sacred writings, some from common sources of knowledge, such as reliable historians.<sup>44</sup>

In conclusion, Elder White pointed out that a “rigid and distorted” concept of inspiration could easily set up a person for discouragement and eventual rejection of God’s gift to Ellen White. No mention was made in this series of any of the research taking place.

Eighteen months later, in a seven-part series in the *Adventist Review* entitled “The E. G. White Historical Writings,” Arthur White became far more specific.<sup>45</sup> He still made no specific reference to the research of others or to the decade of critical scholarship on Ellen White. But clearly the readers of the *Review* were being prepared for the evidence that Ellen White borrowed extensively from secular sources. Elder White acknowledged the discussions going on in Adventist intellectual circles by introducing the first article with the following comment: “In recent months there has been an increasing interest in what have been termed Ellen White’s ‘sources’ for the Conflict of the Ages books in general, and *The Great Controversy* and *The Desire of Ages* in particular.”<sup>46</sup> “The articles,” continued White, “will lead us some distance from the narrow concepts held by some of a mechanical, verbal inspiration\* according to which Ellen White wrote only what was revealed to her in vision or dictated to her by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>47</sup>

The third article of the series dealt specifically with the sources for *The Great Controversy* and included facsimile reproductions from both the Luther manuscript and the Huss manuscript. Referring to the Huss manuscript, Arthur White said, “She condensed materials from Wylie and others and interspersed with spiritual lessons and com-

ments the portions she used.” Then in the second paragraph following, he added, “Unfortunately, for space reasons, the spiritual lessons that she had set forth in the Huss manuscript could not be included. This left the bare historical record as a part of the overall great-controversy narrative.” The careful reader of the *Review* article who put these two statements together could see that Elder White was acknowledging that the material left for publication in the *The Great Controversy* on Huss was taken from Wylie and others.<sup>48</sup> Also in the third article, Elder White asked specifically the question, “Would it have been possible for some inaccuracy to have crept into Ellen White’s descriptions of historical events or that the historians from whom she quoted may have been mistaken in some points of detail and thus, Ellen White, not being especially informed, allowed these mistakes to slip

**“Elder White pointed out that a ‘rigid and distorted’ concept of inspiration could easily set up a person for discouragement and eventual rejection of God’s gift to Ellen White.”**

through into her narrative?” His answer was a straightforward affirmative.<sup>49</sup>

The last four articles in the series dealt with the writing of *The Desire of Ages*. Elder White described the role of Ellen White’s literary assistants in the preparation of the manuscript and considered Ellen White’s relationship to other authors of the life of Christ, such as William Hanna, Alfred Edersheim, Frederick William Farrar and John Cunningham Geike. He presented examples illustrating Ellen White’s use of Hanna that showed her originality in adding historical information and spiritual lessons not present in her secular sources. Some of the research of the past decade was reaching the wider Adventist public.

Judging from the samples used by Arthur White to illustrate Ellen White’s relationship with Hanna in articles 4, 6 and 7, he must

have already had available to him the very thorough and careful study by Walter Specht. Desiring to know the truth about Ellen White’s sources for *The Desire of Ages* and not wishing to be caught unprepared by the research of Walter Rea, or someone else, the White Estate commissioned two eminent Adventist scholars to study thoroughly the relationship of *The Desire of Ages* to William Hanna’s *The Life of Our Lord*. Raymond F. Cottrell, longtime book editor at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, took the first 45 chapters; and Walter F. Specht, professor of New Testament at Loma Linda University, took chapters 46 to 48.

Cottrell’s 39-page paper, dated November 1, 1979, “The Relationship Between *The Desire of Ages* by Ellen G. White and *The Life of Christ* by William Hanna,” and Specht’s 83-page paper with the same title and the sub-heading “Part II” are reassuring. Both authors examined their half of the book, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, and word by word. Whatever might yet be discovered regarding other sources, it is clear that *The Desire of Ages* stands independent of Hanna’s book. Indeed, there are some closely paraphrased paragraphs and other paragraphs where, although Ellen White’s words are different, it is clear she is following the ideas presented by Hanna. But the many other similarities between Ellen White and Hanna can be explained by the assumption that both authors were closely following the Gospels. Cottrell estimated that Ellen White borrowed only 2.6 percent of the first half of *The Desire of Ages* from Hanna. Specht gave no percentage, but came to the same basic conclusion for the last half of *The Desire of Ages*.

Both Cottrell and Specht concluded that Ellen White made creative use of Hanna, improving his language, adding certainty where he was tentative, including new material, giving different theological explanations of some events, and, overall, adding a deep spiritual interpretation by showing the life of Christ in the context of the great-controversy struggle between Christ and Satan. Cottrell also included in his paper a most interesting analysis of literary borrowing by an inspired writer and pointed out several

examples of literary borrowing in the Bible.

The White Estate had commendably taken the initiative, commissioning trusted and credentialed scholars to establish facts and sharing these facts with the readers of the *Review*. But meanwhile Walter Rea had broadened his research and, with the help of others, was attempting to locate every major source for every Ellen White book. In response to his assertions that an alarming proportion of her published work had been borrowed from nineteenth-century writers, Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, appointed a committee to examine his evidence (see p. 15). The committee, mostly scholars and church administrators, met at the Glendale Adventist Hospital on January 28 and 29, 1980, with G. Ralph Thompson, a General Conference general vice president in the chair.

In the March 20, 1980 *Adventist Review* in an article entitled "This I Believe About Ellen G. White,"<sup>50</sup> Neal Wilson informed the church about the Rea committee. The initial report indicates that "in her writing Ellen White used sources more extensively than we have heretofore been aware of or recognized. The committee, however, cautions against the loose use of such terms as 'literary dependency' and 'extensive borrowing and paraphrasing.'" Wilson went on to make five points about the work of a prophet. (1) "Originality is not a test of inspiration." (2) "God inspires people, not words." (3) "The Holy Spirit helps the messenger to select his material carefully." (4) "The prophet's use of existing materials does not necessarily mean that the prophet is dependent upon these sources" and (5) "Whenever we recognize similarities we must also see the dissimilarities."

The statement is a most significant article to appear in the *Review* in this century. The president of the General Conference is openly and honestly acknowledging the facts about Ellen White's use of sources and pointing the church toward a definition of inspiration that will be new to most Adventists and threatening to some. A full response to Walter Rea must wait until he has presented his

evidence to the church in definitive written form.

Most of the researchers of the 1970s have been asking historical questions and answering them with the tools of the historian's craft. No doubt, scholars will continue to ask questions about Mrs. White's relationship to her culture and specifically the relationship of her writings to literary sources. Some major areas remain uninvestigated. But recent developments indicate that theological questions may replace historical questions as the major concerns of the 1980s. Joseph J. Battistone, pastor of the Fletcher, North Carolina, Church, anticipated this interest with a short, provocative article in the January 1977 SPECTRUM. In "Ellen White's Authority as Bible Commentator,"<sup>51</sup> Battistone

**"The president of the General Conference is openly and honestly acknowledging the facts about Ellen White's use of sources and pointing the church toward a definition of inspiration that will be new to most Adventists."**

suggested that "her writings tend to be more homiletical than exegetical," and concluded that "it would be inappropriate to use her writings to settle questions relating to the reading of a text, the meaning of a word, the authorship or date of a Biblical book."<sup>52</sup>

Jonathan Butler, associate professor of church history at Loma Linda University, combined historical and theological perspectives in "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World" published in the August 1979 SPECTRUM.<sup>53</sup> Butler suggested that Ellen White's understanding of Bible prophecy about last-day events was a reflection of her knowledge of religious currents in nineteenth-century America. Implicit, but not explicit, in his article was the conclusion that Ellen White's apocalyptic views were not based only on visions and need to be revised by contemporary Adventists.

As second or third generation Adventists educated in the 1950s and 1960s, these young men grew up unaware of the criticism of Ellen White in her own lifetime and the disagreements about how to interpret her writings in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1950s, these problems seemed to have been swept into the dustbin of history, and the church appeared to be firmly united and settled in its view of Ellen White's spiritual gift. Although verbal inspiration was specifically rejected, Ellen White's words were accepted as the final authority on every question and every topic that she addressed. The publication of the three-volume *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* in 1962-1963, and ever more of her writings in ever more accessible form, gave Adventists an authoritative guide to nearly every question they faced.

The scholars of the 1970s did not question this consensus because of a link with the questions of the 1920s and 1930s. Their questions arose out of their own experience. Ironically, the very push of the church to make the writings of Ellen White more central and more available and at the same time establish a high-quality educational system that called for the training of Adventist teachers as first-class historians, scientists and biblical scholars made inevitable the discovery once again that Ellen White borrowed significantly from secular authors and that some of her statements did not agree with the facts of history, science or biblical scholarship.

The Ellen White scholars of the 1970s began their research as committed Adventists who fully accepted the authenticity of Ellen White's spiritual gift. They were not seeking to "tear down" Ellen White or to undermine confidence in the "Spirit of Prophecy." They began their research because they had become aware in the course of their study of statements that appeared to be inaccurate. The easy thing to do, and certainly from the point of view of their careers in the Adventist church, the wise thing to do, would have been to drop the topic like the hot potato it was. But the facts, the brute facts, to use Alfred North Whitehead's phrase,<sup>54</sup> would not go away.

After one decade of critical examination of Ellen White's writings, where do we now stand? What questions have been answered? What facts have been established? What are the implications of this research for the Adventist Church, and where do we go from here?

Three points have been clearly established. One is that Ellen White took much material from other authors. And she did not use secular literary sources just to provide clear descriptions of historical events, health principles or other information revealed to her in vision; she also used these sources to provide information not seen in vision.

Second, Ellen White was a part of late nineteenth-century American culture and was influenced by contemporary health reformers, authors and fellow Adventist church leaders. This fact should not surprise us, for no one can live outside the culture and be uninfluenced by contemporary values and contemporary tastes. Ellen White traveled extensively, read widely, and learned from experience. Without diminishing one whit from the special revelation of the Holy Spirit to Ellen White, we must acknowledge that she was shaped by her environment just as all of us have been shaped by ours.

The third point which recent Ellen White scholarship has established is that Ellen White was not inerrant. Inevitably, as she incorporated into her own articles and books contemporary ideas and the words of contemporary historians, health reformers and devotional writers, she passed along errors of fact and some of the misconceptions of her generation.

At the present time, these conclusions are not widely accepted by Adventists. Less than 20 percent of the members of the Adventist church live in the North American Division; and of this group of over 574,000 people, probably less than 5,000 have read the Numbers' book or the articles published in SPECTRUM on Ellen White.

The impact of this research will nevertheless be great. Because of the high percentage of college graduates and the large number of professional, business and academic laymen in our church, the ideas shared by a few can quickly reach the thought leaders of practi-

cally every congregation. Also, either in response to SPECTRUM or the same social forces that called forth SPECTRUM, the *Adventist Review* is more open than it has ever been before and is itself disseminating some of these very conclusions. Inevitably, these issues will be discussed widely in the Adventist Church.

The significance of this debate can hardly be overemphasized. Ellen White is so central to the lives of Seventh-day Adventists that her words impinge on practically every area of Adventist teaching and practice both individually and institutionally. Our dress, our diet, what we read and how we spend our leisure time are all influenced greatly by what we believe the Lord revealed to us through His servant, Ellen White. Our interpretation of the Bible, especially the texts which support some of our landmark doctrines, rests on Ellen White. Even the administrative procedures and policies of the church owe much to our understanding of what God was telling us through Ellen White. To consider her words as possibly derived from someone else and not necessarily the final authority introduces an element of chaos into the very heart of Adventism that makes all of us uneasy. Benjamin McArthur, assistant professor of history at Southern Missionary College, has made this point in the November 1979 SPECTRUM in an article entitled "Where Are Historians Taking the Church?"<sup>55</sup> And yet we have no choice but to be honest at heart, acknowledge facts, and seek the truth. The search for truth is, after all, the basic premise upon which Adventism is founded.

This is the dilemma that confronted those who accepted Ellen White's spiritual gift even in her day. The publication of partial transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference makes this abundantly clear. On the one hand, these college Bible teachers, editors and General Conference administrators had personal knowledge of Ellen White's unique spiritual gift.

But alongside this, some of these men—like A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference, W. W. Prescott, former editor of the *Review and Herald* and H. C. Lacey, teacher of religion at the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary—also knew that Ellen White copied from other sources and made statements that were not correct. Her works were not entirely original and they were not infallible. This was, and still is, the dilemma for Adventists.

One of the great tragedies of Adventist history is that the generation of 1919 did not take the risks, which we can acknowledge were formidable, and share with the church the dilemma that they faced. That generation of church leaders lived too close to the prophet and were subject to historical forces that made it almost impossible for them to take this enlightened and wholesome step. Today's generation of church leaders have the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to open to the entire church the fascinating question of how God has worked through Ellen White. A perilous and yet exciting and ultimately victorious period lies ahead if today's generation of Adventists face honestly and openly the question of inspiration.

We need to recognize that while God has always worked through prophets, he also worked through communities that nurture the prophets and interpret the prophecies. The Holy Spirit gave the early Christian community the wisdom to identify those books that belonged in the Canon of Holy Scriptures. The Holy Spirit gave the early Adventist community the wisdom to recognize and accept the spiritual gift of Ellen White. Certainly, the Holy Spirit can and will work through God's remnant today to lead us into a fuller understanding of this unique revelation to Ellen White. We will undoubtedly never understand fully the gift of prophecy in Ellen White's life, but together we must try. The risks are already great because of the long delay. To delay longer will only increase them.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I am using the word critical, not pejoratively, but as used by scholars. One dictionary definition is "Exercising, or involving, careful judgment; exact; nicely judicious; as a *critical* examination."
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3. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933.
4. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1934.
5. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1951.
6. "The 'Spirit of Prophecy,'" pp. 69-72.
7. "Divine Revelation: A Review of Some of Ellen G. White's Concepts," pp. 35-56.
8. Harder, p. 44.
9. Harder, p. 40.
10. Harder, p. 49.
11. "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," pp. 30-33.
12. Pp. 57-69.
13. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study," p. 63.
14. "Ellen G. White and Her Writings," pp. 43-64.
15. Bradley, p. 51.
16. Bradley, p. 54.
17. Bradley, p. 58.
18. Bradley, p. 58.
19. Pp. 84-91.
20. "The Bible and the French Revolution: An Answer," pp. 55-72.
21. Wood, p. 69.
22. Peterson, pp. 73-84.
23. Graybill, pp. 49-53.
24. Peterson, "Ellen White's Literary Indebtedness," p. 76.
25. Numbers (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976).
26. Writing in the authoritative *American Historical Review*, James Harvey Young of Emory University called the book "an excellent case study" and concluded: "If Numbers' fine book has any fault, it is in failing to convey adequately the charisma that Ellen White must have possessed to permit her, aided by her husband's talents at administration and publicity, to overcome considerable opposition to her health ideas and fasten them as articles of faith upon her expanding body of disciples." *AHR*, 82 (April 1977), 464.
27. Pp. xi-xii. The asterisk indicates that Numbers is quoting Arthur L. White, "Ellen G. White and the Shut-Door Question." (Mimeographed copy of a statement to appear in his forthcoming biography of Ellen G. White).
28. Norwood, "The Prophet and Her Contemporaries," pp. 2-4; Ellen G. White Estate, "A Biased, Disappointing Book," pp. 4-13; Brodie, "Ellen White's Emotional Life," pp. 13-15; Sandeen, "The State of a Church's Soul," pp. 15-16; Schwartz, "On Writing and Reading History," pp. 16-20; Guy, "What Should We Expect from a Prophet?" pp. 20-27; Numbers, "An Author Replies to His Critics," pp. 27-36.
29. "Faith, History and Ellen White," pp. 51-55.
30. Norwood, p. 4.
31. Brodie, p. 14.
32. Sandeen, p. 16.
33. My work on Ellen White's use of Protestant historians in the preparation of *The Great Controversy* has been described by Eric Anderson in the July 1978 *SPECTRUM*. "Ellen White and Reformation Historians," pp. 23-26.
34. McAdams, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians," pp. 18-19.
35. Graybill, pp. 5-6.
36. White, "Toward a Factual Concept," p. 21.
37. White, "Toward a Factual Concept," p. 19.
38. White, "Toward a Factual Concept," pp. 38-39.
39. White, "Toward a Factual Concept," p. 22.
40. Edersheim's volumes have been reprinted complete and unabridged in one volume by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 1977.
41. This volume has also been reprinted in one volume by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 1971.
42. P. 2.
43. "Toward an Adventist Concept of Inspiration," January 12, 1978, pp. 28-30; "The Prophet Bears Testimony," January 19, 1978, pp. 7-9; "The Question of Infallibility," January 26, 1978, pp. 6-8; "The Importance of Understanding Inspiration," February 2, 1978, pp. 6-8.
44. White, "Toward an Adventist Concept," January 19, 1978, p. 8.
45. "Ellen G. White's Sources for the Conflict Series Books," July 12, 1979, pp. 4-7; "Rewriting and Amplifying the Controversy Story," July 19, 1979, pp. 7-9; "Historical Sources and the Conflict Series," July 26, 1979, pp. 5-10; "Writing on the Life of Christ," August 2, 1979, pp. 7-11; "Preparing *The Desire of Ages*," August 9, 1979, pp. 7-10; "Completing the Work on *The Desire of Ages*—1," August 16, 1979, pp. 6-9; "Completing *The Desire of Ages*—2," August 23, 1979, pp. 6-9.
46. White, "The E. G. W. Historical Writings," July 12, 1979, p. 4.
47. White, "The E. G. W. Historical Writings," July 12, 1979, p. 4. Asterisk refers to earlier series in *Review*.
48. White, "The E. G. W. Historical Writings," July 26, 1979, p. 7.
49. White, "The E. G. W. Historical Writings," July 26, 1979, p. 9.
50. Wilson, pp. 8-10.
51. Battistone, pp. 37-40.
52. Battistone, p. 39.
53. Butler, pp. 2-13.
54. *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures*, 1925 (Mentor, 1948), p. 15.
55. McArthur, pp. 8-14.